

Report on School Meal Participation Surveys

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Background and Objectives

As a part of the Ending Hunger in Maine AmeriCorps VISTA initiative with the Maine Department of Education, this project aims to determine barriers to increasing school meal participation in the state. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, school nutrition programs have faced the need to adapt dramatically. The shift toward remote and hybrid learning models in schools means that no more than 50% of students are in the school building at one time—to ensure the health and safety standards set by the CDC. With the implementation of these new learning models, systems were created to get meals to kids outside of the cafeteria. Emergency waivers were put into place by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), making school meals free for all students, regardless of family income eligibility. While the pandemic has caused an increase in financial distress and food insecurity for many families, school districts across the state have seen an overall decrease in meal participation.

At the beginning of March 2021, the Maine Department of Education Child Nutrition Team sent out two surveys—one for Maine parents and the other for Food Service Directors. These surveys aimed to gain insight into parent perception of school meal programs, and the specific challenges and successes that school nutrition staff have experienced in terms of meal participation. This report outlines the qualitative and quantitative results of these surveys, and proposes next steps moving forward. This project supports the overall goal of ensuring as many Maine students as possible have access to healthy school meals in order to alleviate food insecurity.

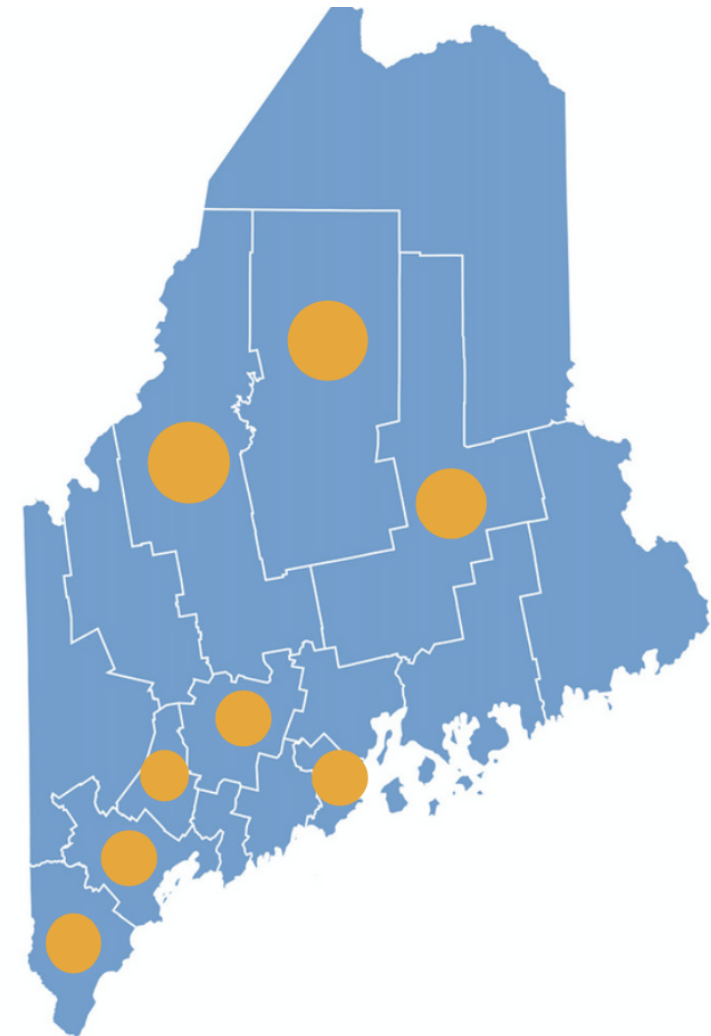
Considerations and Disclaimer

The results of these two surveys do not represent the experiences, opinions, and sentiments of all school nutrition staff and parents throughout the state. We are only able to offer conclusions and further suggestions based on the responses given. We would like to extend our appreciation to the parents and Food Service Directors who took the time to provide thoughtful responses to the survey questions. These results have given us insight into how we can further uphold the goal of feeding Maine's children and supporting school nutrition staff.

Parent Survey

This survey was sent to directors to then distribute to their district's parents, caregivers, and guardians. The survey yielded 163 parent responses from districts spanning across eight out of Maine's sixteen counties. The responses represent parents from districts ranging in size, geographic location, and demographics. It is known that families experience food insecurity and financial struggles in different ways depending on many community factors. Maine consists of rural and urban communities, as well as racially homogeneous and more diverse areas. Representation of the whole state was an important goal when sending out this survey—there is certainly room for representation from more communities, but insight from many of Maine's communities are recognized, nonetheless.

Figure 1. Counties represented in parent responses.



Question 1: How do you receive the free and reduced school lunch eligibility forms?

This question aims to gain insight into the methods in which the meal benefits applications are typically distributed to parents. The responses from this question indicate that the vast majority of respondents receive and fill out these applications in their paper form.

- 88% receive the applications via mail, pick them up at school, or get them through their student bringing them home with beginning of the year materials.
- Only 12% of respondents indicated they access and complete the application online via their school's webpage.

These results may indicate that the efforts toward shifting to online-only accessible applications have not been successful yet. A perceived benefit to an online application system is that it ensures confidentiality—a concern for many families when sharing information on socioeconomic status. An increased effort towards online-only applications could provide parents with ease of mind and an increase in accessibility. It could be useful to re-survey in the future to determine whether online applications work as a means to increase application return rates and overall school meal participation.

Question 2: How long does the meal benefit application take to complete?

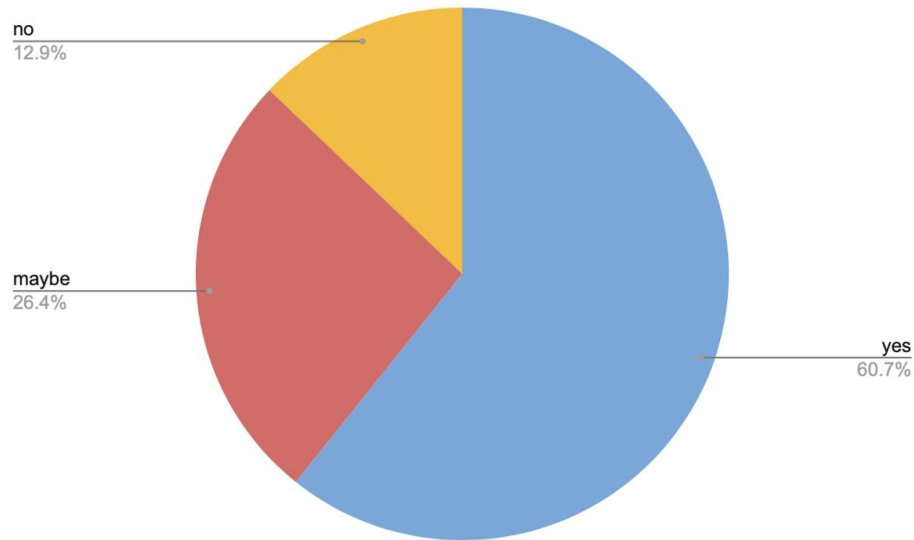
During preliminary research and conversations prior to this survey, it was indicated that the resource of time is a significant barrier to completing the meal benefit application. However, the responses to this question indicate that this may not be a prominent barrier.

- 89% of respondents answered that the application takes 20 minutes or less to complete.
- 11% of respondents answered that they do not fill out the application because they know they would not qualify for free/reduced price school meals.

The results from this question may indicate that the time it takes to complete the application is not a significant barrier for families. However, we must remember that no additional information about the parent respondents is provided—such as family income, occupation, number of children, language barriers/additional assistance needed, etc. These responses provide a snapshot of the greater truth, so we can only infer that there may be other, more significant, barriers to completing the meal benefit application.

Question 3: Are you able to get assistance with the application if needed?

Figure 2. Indicating knowledge of assistance with meal benefit application.

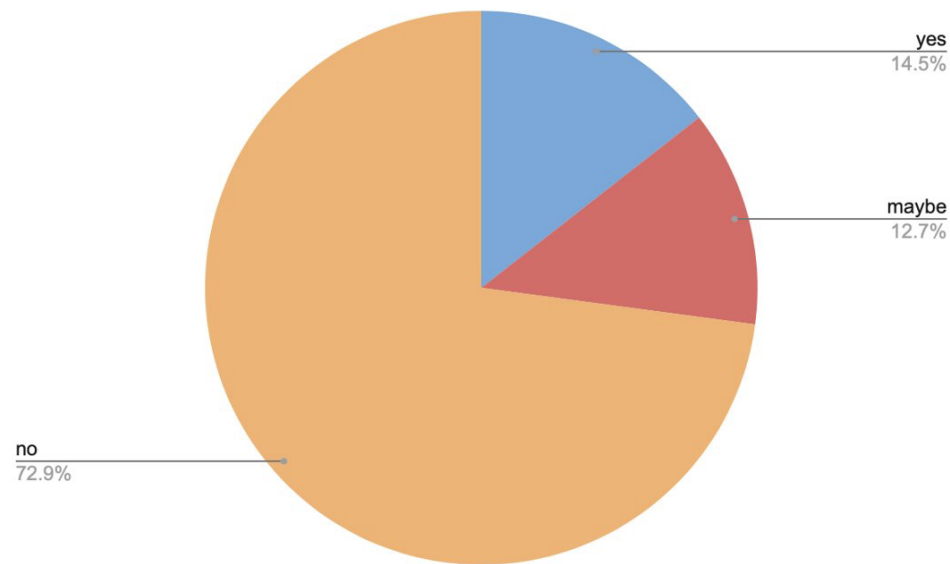


This graph indicates that the majority of parent respondents are aware that there are resources available to assist them in the application process if needed. However, the remaining approximate 40% is either unsure or does not believe assistance is available if needed. These results may indicate that there is opportunity for information on assistance to become clearer. If more families knew they can receive help navigating the application, there could be higher return rates—and therefore higher student participation.

Question 4: Are you worried about sharing your information on these forms?

This question is aimed to gain a sense of some of the overall concerns families have with sharing sensitive information about income and assistance. As part of the overall goal of this survey, this question was asked to determine specific existing barriers to completing the meal benefit application and participating in school meal programs.

Figure 3. Respondents' concern about confidentiality of meal benefit application.

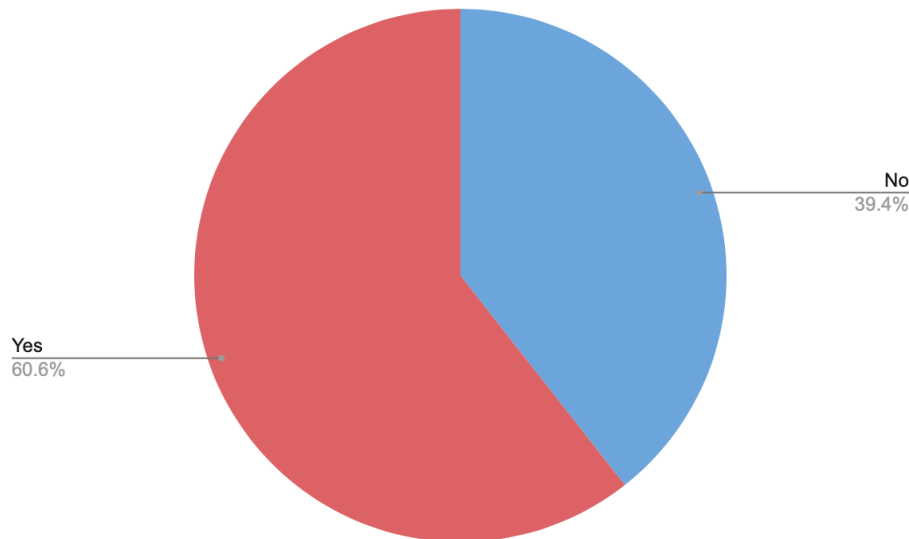


As this graph indicates, a strong majority of the respondents do not feel concerned about the confidentiality of the meal benefit application. Although it should not be overlooked that the remaining 27% of the group do worry or have some level of concern, we can infer that confidentiality concerns are not a significant barrier to completion of the meal benefit application. Communication with families should reiterate that the information they share on the meal benefit application is confidential, and by sharing family income information, they may be able to access additional and vital benefits. As touched on before, a move toward online-only applications could also ensure families' confidentiality and ease these concerns.

Question 5: Are you aware of the financial benefits to the school when your child participates in school meals?

Federal reimbursements that school districts receive from serving school meals provide essential academic resources for our schools. These resources and benefits include Title I funding, teacher loan forgiveness, and other academic grants. This question aims to determine overall knowledge of this benefit, and whether this is a motivation for families to enroll their child in school meal programs.

Figure 4. Respondents' knowledge of federal reimbursement for academic resources.



As the above figure indicates, the majority of respondents are aware of the financial benefits to schools through federal reimbursements. However, this majority result does not necessarily indicate that families are motivated to participate in school meal programs based on this knowledge—that federal reimbursements benefit their children’s schools. Since there are the remaining 40% of respondents in this group that indicated they are not aware of this benefit, it can be presumed that this gap in knowledge exists amongst families across the state of Maine. Moving forward, efforts can be focused on portraying the importance of participating in school meal programs in the context of providing key academic resources.

Question 6: Why do you choose for your child to participate (or not participate) in school meals?

This open-ended question lent really important insight into the main reasons for families’ choices in regard to their child’s participation in school meals. Since this survey was meant to be completed by both participating and non-participating families, the answers to this question range tremendously.

- 56% of respondents do participate in school meal programs.
- 35% of respondents do not participate.
- 9% of respondents participate on some level.

The main identified reasons families choose to participate in school meals based on the responses to this question include:

- Financial benefit to the family/budget saving.
- Nutrition and enjoyment—their kids enjoy the food and the parents like the fact that they are exposed to healthy and new foods.
- Convenient and timesaving.

Below are notable responses that express positive feelings about school meal programs.

“Every little bit of savings on household costs helps.”

“The kids like the food, it makes my life much easier not having to make lunches for them to take to school, and it’s AMAZING that they’re free to everyone right now.”

“It’s convenient and helps keep the grocery bill down”

“This year has been SO amazing with free lunch”

“Since we are not usually eligible, we appreciate the opportunity for a free hot meal.”

“I choose for the kiddos to eat at school because (A) it’s free and helps with our grocery funds. (B) Mornings are always crazy trying to get ready for school and work. It’s less stress not having to make lunches and to count on being fed at school.”

“It’s a great way for him to try new foods, that he wouldn’t typically try at home!!”

“It is healthy and helps the schools with federal funding”

These responses indicate that there are many reasons that families choose to participate in school meal programs—including the fact that participation has been free for all students since the spring of 2020.

Several respondents indicated that their children will eat school meals some of the time. Below are quotes from responses expressing reason for participating on a partial level.

“My children eat the meals they like at school and pack lunch for meals they don’t.”

“My child chooses which days they would like to participate based on monthly menu”

“The decision to participate in school meals depends on the item(s) on the menu.”

These responses indicate that parents and caregivers take into account their child’s food preferences when making the decision to receive a meal at school on a day to day basis. When school nutrition programs communicate with their families on a regular basis, parents are able to make informed decisions and be confident that their child will enjoy a meal at school. We may not get to a point of 100% school meal participation for all Maine districts, but the more that children and parents are able to get excited about school meal options, the more potential of increased participation.

While there were many positive responses expressing why respondents choose to enroll their children in school meal programs, several responses indicated that they opt out of their district’s meal program for a variety of reasons. The main reasons for not participating are identified as such:

- Negative perceptions of the food being served.
- Child food preferences.
- Not needing the service (and not wanting to take away from a family in need).

Negative perceptions of school nutrition programs have been pervasive for many years. Despite the increase of resources, time, and improvements put into school nutrition programs and the hard work of Food Service Directors and staff these negative opinions still exist. Some families may never have the desire to participate in school meal programs, due to different values and food preferences. Therefore, 100% meal participation may not be a realistic goal in the near future. A continued effort toward improving meal program quality and an increase of positive communication is needed in order to mitigate the negative perception of school meals.

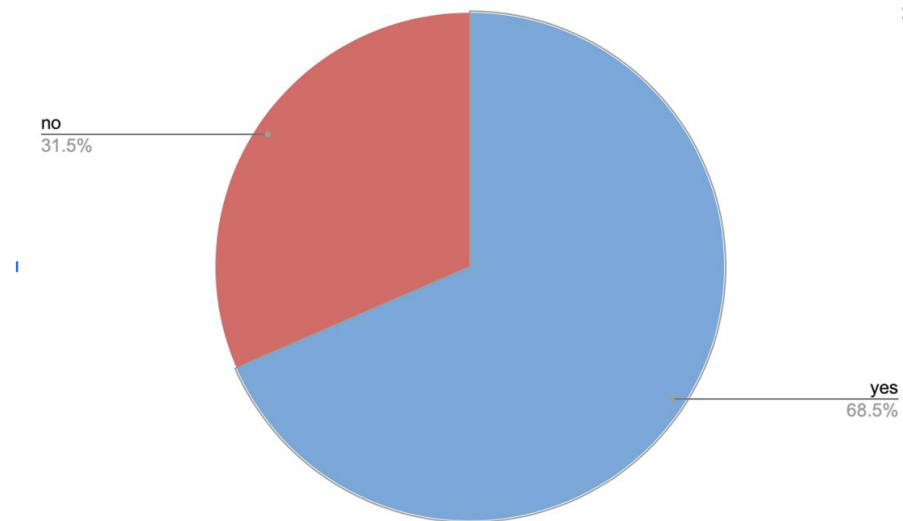
Misconception around who can benefit from school nutrition programs was also prevalent in responses. An example of this sentiment can be seen in this response: *“My children are not food insecure and we do not wish to take resources away from those who are.”* There were several responses like this one, and while the intention behind it is good, it is misguided. Moving forward, communication with families can reiterate that school meals are available and

can be a benefit to *everyone*—especially as they continue to be free for all students through School Year 2022

Question 7: Do you receive frequent updates about the school meal programs such as monthly menus, changes in the program, paperwork, etc?

Another goal of this survey is to determine the quality and methods of communication between school nutrition program staff and families. This question specifically is intended to gain a basic sense of whether or not the majority of families receive frequent updates and information from their district's program.

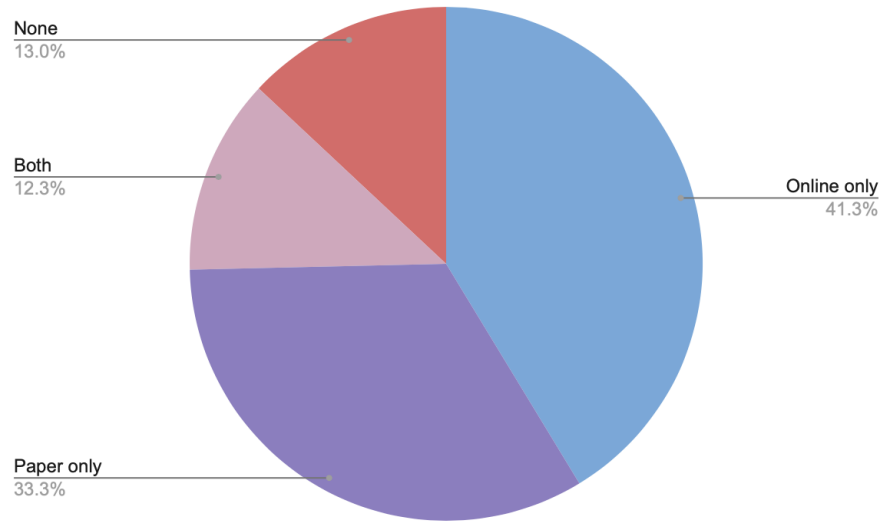
Figure 5. Determining percentage of parent respondents that receive frequent program updates.



This graph portrays that nearly 70% of respondents indicate that they receive frequent communication from their district's school nutrition programs. This includes methods such as through menu updates, paperwork, announcements, and other information.

Question 8: How do you receive these updates?

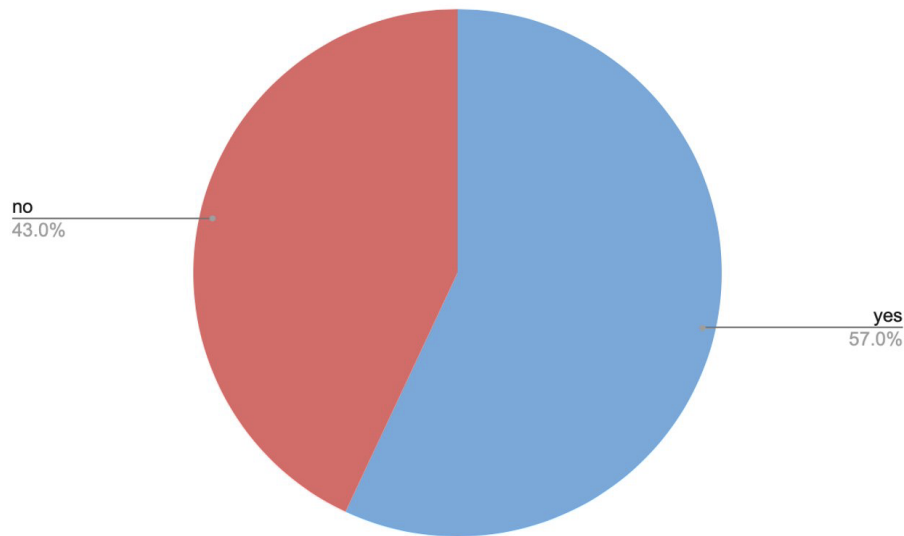
Figure 6. Methods in which respondents receive updates from school nutrition programs.



This figure shows that the primary ways in which families receive food program updates varies. There's a slight majority toward online-only updates, but the results indicate that one third of respondents still primarily receive paper-only updates as their primary communication—such as mailings, flyers at meal pickups, and printouts that their children take home.

Question 9: Would you like to see more information and resources shared on social media platforms?

Figure 7. Respondents' desire for more information shared on social media.



Out of this group of parent respondents, 57% indicated that they would like to see more school meal program information shared specifically on social media platforms. However, a sizable portion of respondents indicated that they would prefer not to receive more information on social media platforms. These results may tell us that in some districts, there may be room for increased communication via social media platforms—and that this is something that families would find useful. It should not be overlooked, however, that many districts are already sharing information and updates on their social media platforms. Staff can be mindful to not overwhelm families with an excess of information, especially on social media platforms.

Food Service Director Survey

This survey yielded 63 Food Service Director responses (out of Maine's 227 school districts). The results of this represent directors from districts ranging in size and demographics. As stated, gaining as much representation as possible was an important goal when sending out surveys. While we did not gain responses from all districts' food service staff, these responses provide meaningful information and insight to put into action moving forward.

Question 1: The onset of the pandemic created a huge shift in the way school meal programs took place... what are examples of new methods of getting food to kids? Successes? Challenges? Plans moving forward?

The goal of this question was to provide a space where Food Service Directors could express the ways in which they have adapted to the multitude of changes and challenges in meal service since the onset of the pandemic. Here are the primary ways in which meal service has changed that are identified in Food Service Director responses:

- Home deliveries
- Pickup sites
- Take-home meals (multiple meals at a time, rather than one meal at pickup)

In their responses, these are the main challenges they identified and faced during this time of change:

- Lack of participation
- Stigma surrounding school meal programs
- Communicating effectively with families
- Building trust in their community with many changes taking place

Below are quotes of responses to this question that represent the sentiments and experiences of directors during this time.

"We now provide Take Home meals to in-school students for remote days, and deliver or have picked up bulk meal boxes for our 100% Remote students. Our requests for take home and remote meals are a fraction of our student enrollment and have dropped as the year went on and students came back to in person learning. Feeding our in-school High School students is the challenge. They just do not eat! We offer their favorites every day

and many choices, still less than half eat each day. Before pandemic, 75% ate each day.... We hope to be back 100% next Fall with enrollments and meal counts back up. We will still offer bulk meal boxes to any Remote Learners. We do not serve on weekends, holidays and some school vacations."

"We did home deliveries, community pick up sites, outside school pick up sites. Home delivery was the way that the majority of families got their meals during the complete shutdown. We were serving more on home delivery than what we normally served in school. Families did not really utilize pick up service. The challenge was getting parents to fill out the sign up forms, but after a number of attempts, it went incredibly well. This year with the hybrid model, the participation is very low. Adding more variety and continue advertising is the plan"

"Serving meals in classroom, room service meals, serving meals at key access points in the building, Offering Mobile Meals @ 5 locations throughout 2 towns, free online ordering for maximum acceptance of meals. Successes: Mobile Meals & Online Ordering, and a "full court press" of marketing. Challenges: participation when less than 50% of students are present on any given day. Access for families that are learning at home (in spite of mobile meals & delivery options), stigma attached to school meals"

"Challenges - communication, building trust, transportation / successes- now serving breakfast in classroom, barriers for meals in classroom lifted, "forced collaboration" with principals, building administrators, new appreciation for school nutrition programs & the quality of food being provided. Plans moving forward? I hope to continue with breakfast in classroom & breakfast in alternative delivery methods throughout the district."

These responses, and others like this, tell us that Food Service Directors and school food service staff have had to work tremendously hard to adapt to the challenges they have been presented with. Many factors have impacted school nutrition programs. The decrease in participation we have seen across the state can be attributed to both factors that existed prior to the pandemic, as well as shifts in the system that have caused barriers to gaining participation. Moving forward, support systems and resources can be implemented to assist Food Service Directors in their existing efforts to ensure as many kids as possible have access to nutritious school meals.

Question 2: How do you connect with families/the community to increase participation in school meal programs?

Several districts have been making significant efforts toward increasing participation by being in communication with families and their community. Here are the primary means of communication that can be identified in the responses to this question:

- Email
- Social Media
- Newsletters
- Mail
- Flyers in meal pickups
- School Website
- Texts and phone calls

When considering the significant shift in the way school meals were provided in 2020, a shift in outreach methods comes along with that. It is clear from Food Service Director responses that significant efforts were made to reach as many families as possible during the time of change.

Question 3: What methods do you use to increase accessibility of the free/reduced eligibility forms?

This question aims to gauge the accessibility of the meal benefit application, and whether directors are making efforts toward that. Accessibility methods identified in responses are:

- Online accessibility
- Distributing informational materials
- Word of mouth
- Phone calls

Many responses expressed the challenges they face in terms of getting families to fill out meal benefit applications. These responses highlight these challenges, despite their continued efforts:

“We have tried several things and nothing is working well. A lot of our families are non-compliant in sending back the applications.”

“NutriLink online form, Online registration had a link, I created a google form for all families that did not return the form. We did weekly email and telephone calls to these families in October, we partnered with ELL - We still dropped 5% over the previous year”

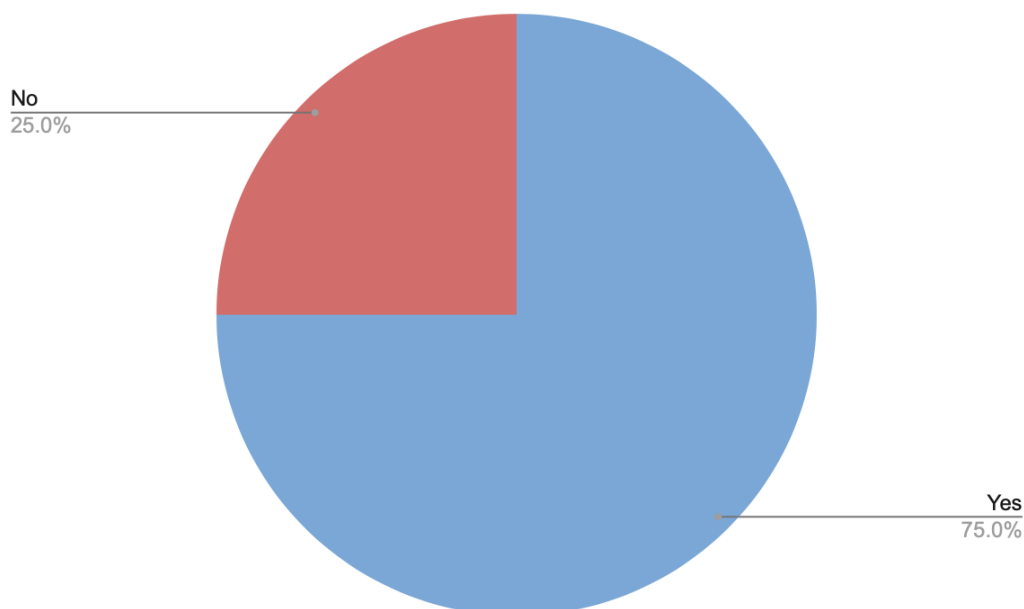
“This has been a struggle this year. We send home packets, we call, call, and do more calling.”

These responses prove that many districts’ Food Service Directors are making considerable efforts to encourage families to complete the meal benefit applications. However, it’s evident that there are still existing barriers in the way of gaining participation this way. Support in this area moving forward will be important when moving toward the goal of increasing overall school meal program participation.

Question 4: Is the form available online to be completed and filed?

While many responses to the previous question indicated that the application is accessible online, this question aims to quantify the number of districts in this group who use online application platforms.

Figure 8. Respondents indicating if the meal benefit application is available online.



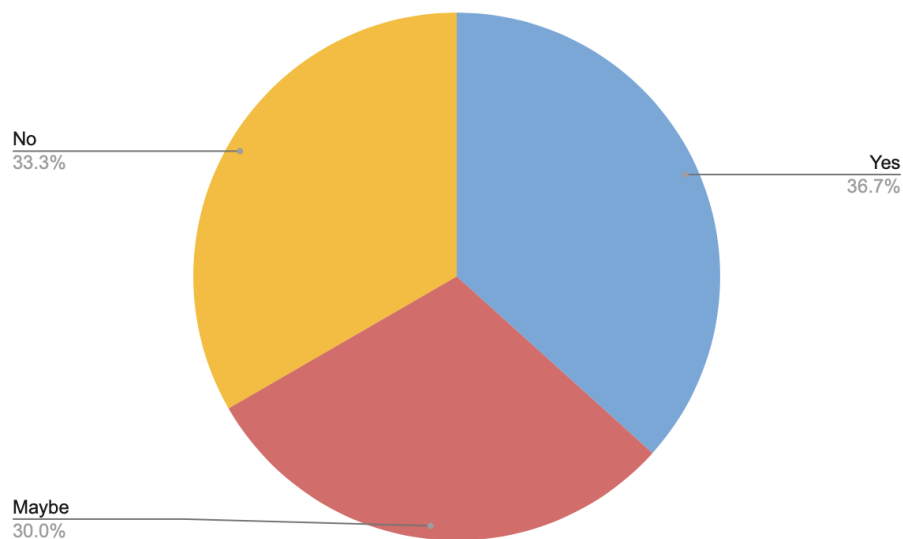
Within this group of Food Service Director respondents, a strong majority provide online accessibility for the meal benefits applications.

Question 5: If applicable: what efforts are in place, if any, to increase culturally significant foods within the programs? (for new Mainer populations)

The topic of culturally appropriate foods is one of increasing importance in parts of the state of Maine. While the state lacks overall racial/ethnic diversity, Maine has seen an influx of new American populations seeking refuge in more urban areas over the past couple decades—specifically the cities of Portland and Lewiston. Inclusivity in school food service is something to consider in all districts across the state, based on specific needs of the community they are in. As expected, Portland and Lewiston Public Schools were the primary districts that expressed the efforts they have in place toward increasing culturally significant foods in their programs. Other larger districts expressed that this could be an important goal, while smaller districts in rural areas expressed that they do not see a need at the moment. Diversity and inclusion are important goals related to increasing school meal program participation; however more research is needed to further discuss how actions can be put into place in Maine.

Question 6: In regards to the previous question, do you find that this is an important goal to increase participation?

Figure 9. Perceived importance of increasing culturally significant foods in meal programs.



The results from this question show that Food Service Director respondents have very mixed views on the importance of this topic. Again, there are complexities to the topic that would need to be researched further in order to come to a conclusion.

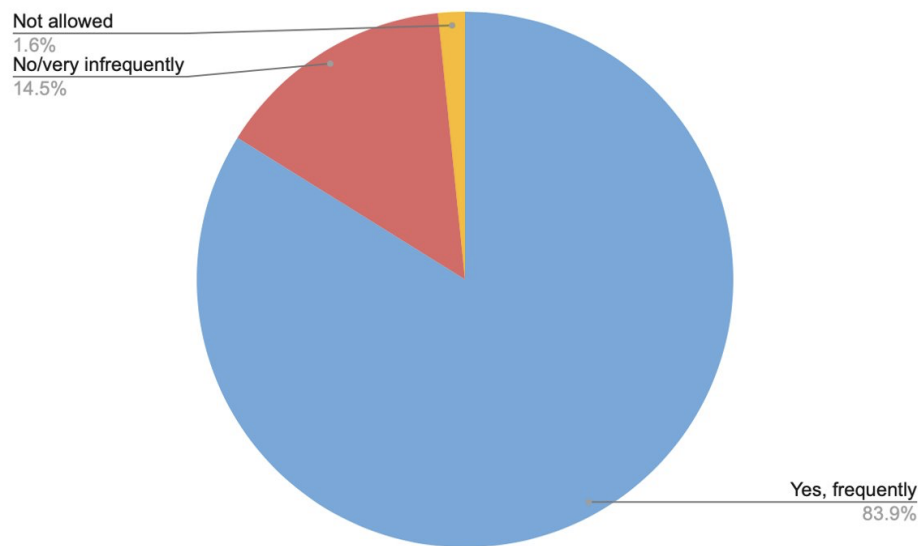
Question 7: Does your district currently use any social media platforms to get the word out to families to increase participation? Which platforms do you use?

This survey has proven that school nutrition staff utilize many avenues of communication to spread information and updates to families. It is important, however, that programs adapt their communication methods to the needs of their families so that as many people are reached as possible. The responses to this question tell us the methods of communication most commonly used, and can be compared to parent responses to determine any discrepancies.

The main methods of online communication identified in responses are:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- School-specific software
- Email
- School webpages

Figure 10. Use of social media platforms by food service directors.



The results from this question show that the majority of Food Service Director respondents from this group frequently utilize online/social media platforms to communicate with families. When we revisit parent responses, however, only about 41% responded that the primary way in which they receive updates is via social media. When considering how to

improve communication with families, it is important to determine which platforms and methods work best for the district's specific population.

Takeaways and Next Steps

Based on the results of this survey and research surrounding this project, we can take specific action with the goal of supporting school nutrition staff towards increasing participation. We can identify several existing barriers to meal participation based on responses, including:

- Stigma—unfortunately school meals are still perceived by many families as low quality, unhealthy, etc.
- Misconception—many families believe school meals are only an option for low-income students and they do not want to take away the resource.
- Lack of meal benefit application returns—many families do not complete the application for a variety of reasons.
- Communication—lack of information reaching families regarding school meal programs.

Next steps being put in place by the Maine Department of Education, Child Nutrition Team include creating a set of resource materials for school nutrition staff across the state. A toolkit containing information, tips, and social media templates has been posted to the Child Nutrition Department's webpage. We hope these materials will be utilized by school nutrition programs across Maine, including new Food Service Directors, as a guide to reaching as many students as possible. Continued goals include supporting school nutrition staff, carrying on with areas of research, and spreading a positive message about the benefits of participating in school meal programs.